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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001043

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: A GLOATING NASRALLAH CLAIMS HIZBALLAH
WILL DISCUSS NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

REF: BEIRUT 1041

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a July 16 five-minute personal appearance and subsequent televised speech, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah proudly declared victory for all of Lebanon and took credit for securing the release by Israel earlier in the day of five Lebanese prisoners and 199 bodies of Lebanese and Palestinian fighters. With the prisoner file closed, Hizballah said, his next focus is resolving Sheba'a Farms and other territories in dispute. Nasrallah, who also seemed to credit Hizballah for the formation of a national unity government, said his party is open to discussions on a national defense strategy.

¶2. (C) Our March 14 contacts differed in their views of Nasrallah's message. One believed the speech signaled a new openness by Hizballah. Another commented that the moderate tone of the speech will only increase Christian support for the Christian ally of Hizballah, Michel Aoun. Our assessment is that Hizballah has not changed its priorities, but will exploit its perceived victory to expand its "resistance" goals. In the speech, he repeatedly linked Hizballah's "resistance" movement to Palestinian resistance movements and the liberation of Palestinian prisoners in Israel. End summary.

"HIZBALLAH'S STEADFASTNESS
PROVED VICTORIOUS"

¶3. (C) Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah surprised everyone with a personal appearance at the Hizballah celebration of the return of five Lebanese prisoners and 199 bodies of Lebanese and Palestinian fighters (reftel) held in southern Beirut on the evening of July 16. He appeared for five minutes, in his first public appearance since the July 2006 war, before taking cover to deliver his speech via television, his normal practice.

¶4. (C) Taking full credit for the prisoner exchange, Nasrallah attributed Hizballah's "accomplishment" to the following: victory in the July 2006 war, Hizballah's steadfastness, and Israeli failures to gather information on its soldiers' status or whereabouts, or to secure their

return through any means except negotiations. Nasrallah also thanked the UN Secretary General and the German mediators for their efforts, and implicitly criticized Arab countries for their failure to achieve results for the Palestinians.

TWO DOWN, LIBERATION
OF SHEBA'A IS NEXT

¶15. (C) Referring to the ceremonial photographing of the new cabinet that took place earlier in the day, Nasrallah said Hizballah achieved two of its goals on the same day: the release of the prisoners and the formation of the national unity government. He then insisted on the liberation of Sheba'a Farms, Kfarshouba Hills, and Ghajjar, citing Hizballah's main concern now as "the protection of our country." He thanked President Michel Sleiman for his remarks at an earlier ceremony welcoming the prisoners, and used much of the same language as Sleiman in his own speech, particularly on Sheba'a.

OPEN TO DIALOGUE ON
NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

¶16. (C) Stressing that the responsibility of protection rests foremost with the state, Nasrallah said Hizballah is open to discussions on the national defense strategy as well as on Sheba'a. He called on all Lebanese to gather together in solidarity and to let go of past grudges and refrain from taking revenge for past grievances. He said the government

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should cooperate together to resolve Lebanon's problems.

RESISTANCE IS
OUR IDENTITY

¶17. (C) Nasrallah characterized the identity of the people in the region as an identity of resistance. This resistance led to the release of the Lebanese prisoners, he said, while noting that he has also worked for the release of Palestinian and other Arab prisoners.

MARCH 14 REACTIONS

¶18. (U) Sources in the parliamentary majority said Nasrallah's speech was generally positive. They noted that he mentioned three issues for the first time: 1) openness towards any discussion regarding the national defense strategy; 2) preparedness to discuss and resolve all problematic issues; and 3) demanding that each Lebanese party or group should contribute to defending and protecting Lebanon. The same sources noted that this new approach by Nasrallah towards the defense strategy highlights the role of the state and of the Lebanese Army in defending and protecting Lebanon's sovereignty.

¶19. (C) For example, March 14 MP Robert Ghanem praised Nasrallah's speech, saying, "It indicates that Hizballah is reading some changes in the region, notably between the U.S. and Iran, and that Hizballah does not want to pay the price of any agreement between Iran and the U.S." Ghanem repeated the oft-expressed argument here that pressure should be made to rapidly finish the issue of Sheba'a farms because then all justification for Hizballah retaining its weapons will be eliminated.

¶10. (C) Christian MP Boutros Harb told us today that Nasrallah's speech is likely to help Hizballah ally Michel Aoun in the next elections because the message Nasrallah gave was moderate and signaled that he does not want to retain his weapons indefinitely. This message could play into Christian interests, and Aoun could say that Hizballah and other Shia

are looking for real partnership with the Christians while the Sunnis, such as Saad Hariri, are not.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) While Nasrallah's speech was relatively moderate compared to others he has made, there is no reason to see any shift in Hizballah's positions. Indeed, Nasrallah declared with vehemence and pride that Hizballah and its weapons play an integral role in fighting for Lebanon's interests and security. His implied criticism of the Arab states' lack of results in helping the Palestinian cause sets Hizballah up to argue once again that Israel only understands the use of force, hence, continuing the justification for Hizballah's weapons. We perceive that he is setting the stage for expanding Hizballah's *raison d'etre*.

¶12. (C) The conclusion Nasrallah attempted to drill into Lebanese minds is that Hizballah's existence is not only justified, but necessary. While his rhetoric about discussing a national defense strategy and working together as a government seems positive, Nasrallah sent the message that Hizballah's *raison d'etre* is critical for all of Lebanon, implying that it would be foolish for Lebanon to demand its disarmament. We anticipate that Hizballah will next focus on Sheba'a and its other territorial interests, seeking to exploit this "victory" with the prisoner/remains exchange.

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